



The Best of Both Worlds ~

Local Doula and Author Cynthia Gabriel Empowers Women to Create Natural Birth Experiences Within a Hospital Setting



Photos by Rachael Waring

(Cynthia Gabriel received a Ph.D. in medical anthropology from the University of California and is the founder of Growing Together, a Life Learning Center that offers psychotherapy and life coaching services in Ann Arbor. A life coach and doula, Cynthia has attended nearly 100 births. Cynthia's favorite moments are when she taps into greater strength than she is aware of possessing. She has found pregnancy, childbirth, art and creative writing to be powerful mediums for women to get in touch with their dreams and wisdom. She is the mother of three and lives in Ann Arbor.)

Rachel Pastiva: You recently wrote a book *Natural Hospital Birth: The Best of Both Worlds*, due out in March through Harvard Common Press. Can you speak a little on the premise of the book, and why you were inspired to write about this particular aspect of childbearing?

Cynthia Gabriel: I have interviewed more than 300 women about their birth experiences. Too often women tell their birth stories through tears. While I love to see those women go on to have empowered and more informed second births, I think it is tragic that we have an epidemic of women who desire natural birth in hospitals who can't seem to achieve this meaningful goal.

As a doula for women who desire natural births in hospitals, I slowly realized that what made me successful was not my knowledge of breathing techniques or massage, but my ability to team-build with hospital staff. When I helped women and their partners communicate how significant natural birth was to them, I saw that staff members were more likely to support their goal. Unfortunately, most books and classes do not explain much about team building in the hospital. Without a unified team, women can expect to either be at war with the staff (which doesn't feel good for anyone) or they can expect to receive "regular" birth care, which these days includes dozens of medical interventions, and for a third of women even means a cesarean section.

RP: What are some aspects of the birth experience that are lost during average American hospital births and why should women want to preserve them?

Cynthia Gabriel: I think that most women hope and believe that birth can be sacred. All those reality shows about birth on TV are capitalizing on how beautiful and moving birth is. The reason that I care about preserving natural birth in hospitals is because the experience of giving birth to our babies with our own power is exhilarating, life-changing, and empowering. When we give birth naturally, the hour after our babies are born we are flooded with the most intense hormones we will probably ever experience in life. We don't get this experience when we are drugged up and our babies are pulled out of us. Women who give birth naturally describe

a long-lasting effect that positively changes their perceptions of themselves. They say that they are amazed at their own depths. They are stronger than they had ever imagined. They believe they can do anything. They are excited about facing new challenges in life because they are more aware of their full capacities. Not only are they set up to be confident, happy mothers, but also to be more confident in their careers and other relationships, too.

"I am on a mission to empower birthing women and their families to be able to give birth naturally wherever they choose to give birth."

RP: Why are some women fearful of home births, and how does having a natural hospital birth help assuage fears?

Cynthia Gabriel: I devote a whole chapter in my book to "Feeling Safe." Birth setting, to me, is a secondary concern. Feeling safe is a laboring mother's first concern. Fear is a normal part of birth. So is overcoming that fear and feeling stronger on the other side. Unfortunately, in the United States, we do not have many cultural messages that reinforce the positive benefits of facing our fears. Many women feel safest giving birth in a hospital. They want the feeling of "safety" that all that technology gives them. Other women feel unsafe in hospitals. I believe that women should give birth wherever they feel safest: at home, in the woods, or in a hospital. I do not say this because I believe that most women need immediate access to hospital technology. Actually, they do not. But women need to give birth where they feel safest so that labor can progress well. When a woman (or any mammal) feels unsafe, she releases hormones like adrenaline that can play havoc with labor.



Felix Paulick and Cynthia Gabriel with their children (left to right) Calvin, Anju and Sylvia.

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RP: How can expectant mothers take control of a hospital birth experience and navigate through the pressure of doctors and nurses whose opinions may differ from theirs?

Cynthia Gabriel: This is the most important question that an expectant mother who desires a natural hospital birth can ask. Even when we are not in labor, it is often hard to stand up for what we truly want in life in the face of opposition. The single most effective technique I have seen work in hospitals is to reiterate, over and over again, how meaningful natural birth is *for you*. You will never win if you try to argue with medical professionals about how unnecessary most episiotomies or c-sections are. You just create more adversity when you argue. But if you stick to what you know, that natural birth is important to you, than the instinctive human urge of most doctors, nurses, and hospital midwives is to support you. There are certainly some who stubbornly believe that you are wrong to care about your birth experience, but I have seen many hospital personnel come around because the commitment of a woman is so inspiring.

RP: In your research, have you found that doctors are receptive and encouraging to expectant mothers who want to take a more active role in the birth experience? What would your advice be to women who face resistance from doctors?

Cynthia Gabriel: Some doctors really love attending active, natural births and some think natural birth is just crazy. And there are a lot of doctors who have not seen many natural births, even in years of practice, because there are generally so few to see (only about two percent of hospital births can truly be considered “natural.”) Most midwives and doctors work in shifts, so you don’t know who will be on call when you go into labor. For this reason, you won’t know ahead of time whether your hospital staff will support or resist your plans. So I advise women to bring an experienced doula with them. The laboring mother needs to focus on her body, her contractions, and the baby. If she has a partner, her partner also needs to focus on the labor. But a doula can be a big help in creating the birth experience the woman and her partner are hoping for, even in the face of resistance.

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RP: What advice would you give to an expectant mother who is struggling to determine what her best option is?

Cynthia Gabriel: Look into your heart. No one else will give birth to your baby. Only you will. So you must be at peace with your decisions. If you are not at peace, your body will not produce the right hormones and the whole delicate balance of birth can be upset. Many people will have opinions about what you should do – and they will continue to have those opinions all through the years that you parent this child, too. But for once in your life you can feel fine about basing your decisions on what feels right and true for you. If this is unclear to you, you may need more information or you may simply need a friend who is willing to put aside her own opinions to help you uncover what is in your own heart.

RP: What can people hope to learn who attend your event at Crazy Wisdom?

Cynthia Gabriel: I am on a mission to empower birthing women and their families to be able to give birth naturally wherever they choose to give birth. In hospitals, we need to advocate strongly for ourselves. Most women, even many women who say they want natural birth, end up with epidurals, drugs to stimulate labor, episiotomies, cesarean sections, and other interventions. Some simple “tricks” make a world of difference in the hospital. I am happy to share them with anyone I meet.

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(Cynthia Gabriel can be reached at 734-883-8701 or at cynthia@togrow.org. Her website is at: <http://www.togrow.org/index.html>.)



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Cynthia Gabriel will be talking about her new book, *Natural Hospital Birth: The Best of Both Worlds*, at Crazy Wisdom on Tuesday, April 12th, at 7 pm.



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